

**FACULTY OF MEDICINE**  
**STUDENT RESEARCH EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE (SREQ)**  
**POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS**  
**ANALYSIS OF OPEN RESPONSE COMMENTS: 2005**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ), which evaluates the quality of research higher degree students' experiences, was introduced in 2002. As part of the questionnaire students are asked to provide comments on the best aspects of their university experience and those that could be improved.

Based on the responses to these questions, this document seeks to provide an analysis of the areas of best practice, and opportunities for improvement, in the experiences of postgraduate research students in the Faculty of Medicine in 2005.

### **Degree experience: areas of best practice**

The aspects of degree experience which attracted most positive comments from postgraduate research students in 2005 were:

	% of comments received	
	2005	2004
Quality of supervision: supervisor	24%	21%
Generic skills: graduate attributes	23%	14%
Generic skills: working independently	18%	19%
Overall satisfaction: satisfaction with research	16%	19%
Research climate: supportive work environment	10%	6%
Generic attributes: technical skills	8%	8%

### **Degree experience: opportunities for improvement**

The areas of degree experience which postgraduate research students considered most in need of improvement in 2005 were:

	% of comments received	
	2005	2004
Quality of infrastructure: funding: other (not scholarships or PRSS)	16%	21%
Quality of supervision: supervisor	16%	19%
Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, buildings, offices	12%	18%
Research climate: interaction with other research students (study related)	8%	3%
Research climate: isolation: training hospitals, clinics etc	7%	
Quality of infrastructure: funding: scholarships/ PRSS	6%	

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## **1 Introduction**

The Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ), which evaluates the quality of research higher degree students' experiences, was introduced in 2002. As part of the questionnaire postgraduate research students are asked to provide comments on the following:

- What are the best aspects of your research higher degree experience?
- What aspects are most in need of improvement?

Based on the responses to these questions, this document seeks to provide an analysis of the areas of best practice, and opportunities for improvement, in the experiences of postgraduate research students in the Faculty of Medicine in 2005.

In 2005 71% of students who responded to the SREQ provided comments on the best aspects of their degree experience, and 54% on aspects that were considered to be in need of improvement. The substantial difference in the number of positive comments received compared to those expressing the opposite opinion, possibly indicates an overall satisfaction with the degree experience of postgraduate research students in the Faculty of Medicine.

## **2 Arrangement**

1. Analysis of comments referring to best aspects of the degree course
2. Analysis of comments referring to aspects that could be improved

Within each section, responses are ranked according to the percentage of comments received for each aspect. Sample comments are provided for the six aspects that received the highest percentage of comments. For comparison, results for the previous years qualitative analysis (2002 – 2004) are provided in brackets after the 2005 results.

Only aspects that received more than 5% of comments in 2005 are included in this report. To preserve student confidentiality, sample comments are only provided if there are six or more comments relating to that aspect in the responses. Comments that may possibly identify the student are not been included in the sample comments. Comments are transcribed exactly as they appear in the original documents.

## **3 Analysis of the comments: taxonomy and process**

The manual analysis and evaluation method used by the University is based on an in-house taxonomy which allows for standardisation of reporting across the university and ease of comparison with the SREQ quantitative analysis reports. Within the taxonomy, categories used for the SREQ are identical to the SREQ factor scales, with the addition of Administration and organisation, Ethics Administration, Academic Board policies, International Office, and other administrative areas and support services. This taxonomy is under constant revision as the need to sub-divide categories and create new ones becomes apparent.

Each comment received is analysed according to the SREQ Taxonomy, with those including more than one aspect being counted in each aspect mentioned.

It should be noted, however, that the absence of favourable comments on a particular aspect of learning and teaching does not reflect that this is not an area of best practice. Rather that the students are happy with their experiences, and prefer to focus on commenting on areas in need of improvement.

#### 4 Analysis of comments referring to the best aspects<sup>1</sup>

##### Quality of supervision: supervisor

(2005: 24%)

(2004: 21%; 2003: 17%; 2002: 20%)

- Supervision - I have an understanding, supportive and egalitarian supervisor and co-supervisor who have ensured I work within a well structure research program while giving me the freedom to work independently. I know that I can discuss any issue (professional or personal) with my supervisors at any time.
- The best aspect is having daily contact with my supervisors who also work in the same building and have made themselves available whenever I have a question. They are very supportive.
- Easily accessible supervisor. Seem him 3/4 times a day. Always has time. This is good as it means that I can overcome any problems quickly.
- Supervisors - are helpful and know when to step back to let me try things on my own. I feel I can disagree with them over something and can argue my point - I am not forced to follow their viewpoint

##### Generic skills: graduate attributes

(2005: 23%)

(2004: 14%; 2003: 18%; 2002: 20%)

- Learning advanced problem solving skills and analytical skills, these are skills that I will be able to use in other aspects of my professional and personal life.
- Developing my analytical skills, ability to plan my own work and work independently. Improved my skills in presenting my data and writing communication skills
- The best aspects are the opportunities to learn to develop my written and oral communication skills, as well as the confidence you gain in tackling unfamiliar problems
- Personal development, improving communication skills (and written). Academic development, critical thinking and theory formation

##### Generic skills: working independently

(2005: 18%)

(2004: 19%; 2003: 23%; 2002: 20%)

- The freedom for independent research. This allows the growth of passion, interest and excitement about making discoveries
- Working independently has allowed me to further develop my problem solving skills and gives you a chance to develop your own ideas about the research project and aids in further understanding your field of study
- Having the flexibility to “own” my own research and make my own decisions and at the same time work in a team
- Be able to work independently which allows you to use your analytical skills to try to solve problems by yourself. Train you to think further than what you are instructed

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<sup>1</sup> Number of comment received: 2005: 310; 2004: 304; 2003: 315; 2002: 276

**Overall satisfaction: satisfaction with research**

**(2005: 16%)**

(2004: 19%; 2003: 18%; 2002: 20%)

- Being able to concentrate on one area of work, as opposed to finding short term solutions to ingrained problems. Utilising knowledge for disciplines outside health. For example political science and management
- The intellectual challenge of the research is personally fulfilling and enriching. The hope that the findings will encourage and assist educational planners in the development of continuing medical ethics education.
- Best aspect were the opportunity to be involved in original research work in a field of great current importance and feeling part of the research community and the opportunity to learn how a researcher thinks.
- Completing sections of my projects little by little and getting closer to completion. Discussing my research with other scientists and receiving interest and good ideas back.

**Research climate: supportive work environment**

**(2005: 10%)**

(2004: 6%; 2003: 7%; 2002: 4%)

- The support and encouragement I have received from my supervisors and other students within the department is fantastic. Our department has a working environment that is very conducive to active research. Weekly departmental sessions provide a venue for socialising and learning and strongly enhance the relationships within the group.
- The support and guidance from my supervisors and colleagues provided a supportive environment for thought and research.
- Working in a highly supportive environment, where I can ask anyone for help, advice or comments on my work, as well as having good and friendly atmosphere around me. The ability to communicate with my supervisors anytime, I never had to wait or chase them for feedback. I could not imagine a better place to work.
- I like the people I work with and the research team has a positive, supportive atmosphere.

**Generic skills: technical skills**

**(2005: 8%)**

(2004: 8%; 2003: 11%; 2002: 10%)

- Learning about statistical analysis and in depth knowledge of a subject
- Learning new experimental techniques with the guidance of my supervisors. This will be beneficial for my scientific career
- The postgraduate training courses organised by the Faculty of Medicine help in introducing and understanding new techniques and other available methods and areas of interest
- Gaining expertise in a broader range of scientific techniques which places me well for future endeavours

**Other aspects mentioned included:**

	<i>2005</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2002</i>
Research climate: part of research community: general comments	7%	9%	13%	10%
Research climate: interaction with other postgraduate research students (Study related)	6%	8%	6%	7%
Generic skills: research skills	6%	8%	10%	8%
Research climate: challenging, stimulating etc	5%	7%	4%	3%
Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, buildings, offices etc	5%	6%	4%	7%
Research climate: location/ physical environment	5%		1%	2%

**5 Analysis of comments suggesting improvements<sup>2</sup>**

**Quality of infrastructure: funding (not scholarships or PRSS)**

**(2005: 16%)**

(2004: 21%; 2003: 21%; 2002: 22%)

- Improved financial support in relation to the add-on requirements (attending relevant conferences, related research laboratories, thesis production etc). Current financial supports too restrictive (e.g., if internally-approved candidature time exceeds current limits).
- Lack of funding for consumables/equipment. Constant source of concern in the laboratory because it delays/prevents certain types of experiments.
- Financial support for activities such as attending national and international scientific meetings is inadequate. These activities should be strongly encouraged and fully supported for all postgrad students. These meetings provide an unparalleled opportunity to present our own work and receive valuable feedback, which can add enormous value to a thesis. To be exposed to the latest ideas of many leading researchers all in the one place can provide much needed motivation to a student who spends many, long, solitary hours testing, analysing and writing. Such meetings should not be thought of as a treat for a job well done but rather as an integral part of the research process and therefore funded accordingly.
- Financial support to attend conferences, seminars and training. I have been invited to present at some conferences but cannot afford to go as they are overseas and too expensive

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<sup>2</sup> Number of comment received: 2005: 236; 2004: 239; 2003: 272; 2002: 236

**Quality of supervision: supervisor**

**(2005: 16%)**

(2004: 19%; 2003: 17%; 2002: 20%)

- Supervision. I think that some supervisors are not interested in teaching students, or maybe just don't know how to supervise due to lack of experience. Rather, they treat their students like research assistants. That is, they tell the student what to do and make them begin experiments right from day one of the degree. At the beginning, the student feels that this is good because the sooner they begin experiments, the more results they will get. However, this method of "supervision" is detrimental to the student as the student does not get the opportunity to learn to think for him/herself and becomes accustomed to asking the supervisor for help. Eventually, the supervisor may start to tire and resent the student for all the help he/she is providing, making the student feel guilty! I think that only people who have teaching ability and the desire to teach, should be allowed to become supervisors. Having supervisors who are not fit for the job produces a very destructive higher degree experience for some students.
- Supervision, including expectations that supervisors have of PhD students, needs to be more standardised. Some very intelligent students struggle due to poor supervision or excessively high expectations for the quality of their PhD thesis while more average students sail through to complete their PhD in 3 years as their supervisors give excessive guidance.
- Associate supervisors need to be better trained, as to deal with day to day problems. Otherwise they are not helpful
- faculty of medicine to demand more documentation from supervisors; make sure that every professor who takes on students to do PhD programmes has well-documented research-proposals.

**Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, buildings, offices**

**(2005: 12%)**

(2004: 18%; 2003: 14%; 2002: 20%)

- Quality of the work environment. Being in the Anderson Stuart building and also being in one of a many few labs that DIDN'T have major renovations to our lab, it has made the quality of our research environment feel old and deprived of what is necessary for a good research environment. We lack sufficient bench space that are old, cracked or damaged due to wear and tear which are generally shared between AT LEAST two people all the time and new facilities but we have managed to work through our days on bare essential equipment that date back decades of usage already.
- Postgraduate research students require their own desk space to do their work. It's too late to improve my situation, but please don't approve a new candidature until you can guarantee the basic infrastructure for students, especially external students.
- We need a real quiet place for thesis writing. Although we have a small office space for final year PhD students, it is difficult for me to concentrate on my writing because the office is not really quiet.
- Safety; There are no procedures and monitoring measures for correct disposal, monitoring and usage of RADIATION, DANGEROUS AND MUTAGENIC chemicals!

**Research climate: interaction with other research students (study related)**

**(2005: 8%)**

(2004: 3%; 2003: 9%; 2002: 11%)

- medical faculty/central clinical school should facilitate broader interaction between research students/other academics within the school- everyone tends to do their own thing
- Exposure to other postgraduate students from outside the institute I work in. It would be nice to swap ideas and thoughts with students doing similar research projects as myself.
- It would be nice to be able to mingle with other PhD students from the main campus.
- It will be excellent if there is a common room dedicated for the students to rest or to dine in, in the department. e.g. having proper seats and tables. It will create space and more opportunity for the students to meet and discuss about their work. It will also be a centre where news can be spread.

**Research climate: isolation: training hospitals, clinics etc** (2005: 7%)

*(new topic, previously included in Isolation: affiliated campuses)*

- Westmead is highly isolated from the University events, aid, COUNSELLING, and social organisations, although the postgrad facilities here are very good.
- Since I am off campus (Westmead) I find that I am not in contact with other students much. Even though events are being organised, I generally do not have time to participate. I think it would be nice to be in an environment with more students around.
- Administration, interaction with the university. Feel quite isolated in a small department in a hospital and not really connected with the university.
- Department is off campus so tend to feel isolated. Need to be more integrated with main campus.

**Quality of infrastructure: Funding: scholarships/ PRSS** (2005: 6%)

*(New topic in 2005: previously included with all funding)*

- Funding - the APA scholarship is nowhere near sufficient to support a postgraduate student. I am a mature age student who has returned to study after several years in the workplace. The APA is less than 1/4 of my previous salary. Its difficult to attract and keep good students when the financial support is almost non-existent. I also do not feel that Doctors should receive an excess on their stipend compared to medical scientists - this is discriminatory.
- Funding and scholarships. The APA and UPA scholarship applications close on the 31st of October whereas admissions to the faculty are finalised in Jan next year.
- Funding needs to improved. Introduce generalised scholarships for medical faculty as well as having the existing ones that specialise in a certain area eg cardio-vascular
- More funding for PRSS (postgraduate research support scheme) would be nice. Most people who applied only got 1/2 of what was requested

*All other aspects were mentioned in less than 6% of comments received.*